University of the Pacific
Scholarly Commons

Benerd School of Education Faculty Articles

Gladys L. Benerd School of Education

1-1-2017

What women know: Perceptions of seven female superintendents

Polly D. Allred
Texas A&M University, polly.allred@tamuk.edu

Gerri M. Maxwell
Texas A&M University, geraldine.maxwell@icloud.com

Linda E. Skrla
University of the Pacific, lskrla@pacific.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarlycommons.pacific.edu/ed-facarticles

Part of the Education Commons

ADVANCING

WOMEN IN

LEADERSHIP

EDITORS: BEVERLY J. IRBY, BARBARA POLNICK

Table of Contents

Full Length Research Paper

What Women Know: Perceptions of Seven Female Superintendents

Polly D. Allred, Gerri M. Maxwell & Linda Skrla
Polly D. Allred: Texas A&M University-Kingsville, email: polly.allred@tamuk.edu
Gerri M. Maxwell: Texas A&M University-Kingsville, email: kugmm001@tamuk.edu
Linda Skrla: University of the Pacific, email: lskrla@pacific.edu

An anomalous concentration of female superintendents in mostly rural South Texas prompted this inquiry. South Texas faces critical shortages in personnel due to impending retirement and turnover of existing school administrators and superintendents (Wesson & Marshall, 2012). It is difficult to recruit and retain the best talent necessary to solve tough school improvement challenges—high dropout rates, high poverty, low student achievement, and complex multi-cultural issues—in high needs, Hispanic majority, primarily rural school districts (Trevino Jr., Braley, Brown, & Slate, 2008; Wesson & Marshall, 2012). Krüger (2008) stated women are stronger educational leaders than men. Females seek and obtain leadership credentials for the express purpose of impacting education for students (Young & McLeod, 2001). Schools of all sizes and levels with female administrators achieved higher student success than schools with male administrators, according to a 7000 campus Texas study, in the 2006-2007 academic year (Roser, Brown, & Kelsey, 2009). In every ethnic group, women earn more doctoral degrees in education than men; women earn bachelors and masters degrees in education in proportion to their representation in the field; and women have more years of teaching experience than men (Shakeshaft, Brown, Irby, Grogan, & Ballenger, 2007). Women also outnumber men in education administration preparation programs (Petrie & Lindauer, 2001). Yet women are not ascending to the superintendency in proportion to their representation in the education profession (Shakeshaft et al., 2007). This naturalistic study of seven female superintendents in South Texas, including leaders in large and small rural districts, illuminated perceptions and experiences of female school leadership through portraiture and lent insight into common themes of aspiration and motivation.

Keywords: female, superintendent, aspiration, rural, leadership

Introduction

The skillsets, values, temperament, characteristics, and appearance desired in an American superintendent are determined by expectations ingrained in the fabric of the collective community consciousness relative to historical precedents and cultural influence (Blount, 1999). Gender and the superintendency are societal constructions, and society has constructed the superintendency as masculine, which has been reinforced by those who research, teach, and publish about the superintendency (Skrla, 2000). The term *gender* connotes the socially mediated (enacted, established, produced, and constructed) differences between individuals rather than biological differences between persons, and just as gender is an agreed-upon social construction, "the package of norms associated with the superintendency in U.S. public schools is constructed based on the assumption males will inhabit this

role," (Skrla, 2000, p. 296). Grogan (2003) noted the gendered perspective of the extant body of research literature:

> I have thus found it to be very useful to examine the research on educational administration and on the superintendency, in particular, from the point of view that it represents necessarily gendered perspectives: the majority of both practitioners and researchers in the field have been men. This is not to judge such perspectives as good or bad, right or wrong. It is to acknowledge that they are, for the most part, male ones (p. 17).

This qualitative study sought to collect, analyze, and contribute to the body of research, the perspectives of a set of seven South Texas female superintendents. South Texas experiences an urgent teacher shortage and a large number of principals and superintendents nearing retirement (Wesson & Marshall, 2012). The talent pool of qualified applicants available in Texas, for

principal and mid-management positions, is diminished by the critical shortage of teachers, and because superintendents arise from the ranks of mid-managers, this shortage reduces the number of experienced, technically superior superintendent candidates (Sharp, Malone, Walter, & Supley, 2004; Wesson & Marshall, 2012).

According to statistics published by the Texas Education Agency (TEA) in October 2011, approximately 30% of South Texas regions 1, 2, and 3 superintendents were female—higher than the national percentage of women superintendents (24.1%) in 2010 and the state average percentage of female superintendents (12.7%) in 2001 (Kowalski, McCord, Petersen &Young, 2011;TEA, 2012). Thus the ratio of female superintendents in South Texas to female superintendents in Texas is approximately 2.5: 1, and the ratio of female superintendents in South Texas to female superintendents in the U.S. is approximately 1.25: 1. Therefore, South Texas is an anomalous area rich in potential female superintendent participants for naturalistic research.

Rationale

Difficult challenges faced by school systems require equitable input and effort from the entire school organization talent pool (Glass, Björk, & Brunner, 2000). Education policies and leadership preparation programs will be better able to support effective schools led by mixed gender administrative teams when they have developed deep insights into characteristics of feminine school leadership (Krüger, 2008). Administrator preparation programs are filled with females, and there is a national shortage of qualified administrators, yet women don't fill these posts, resulting in a waste of female preparation and talent (Adams & Hambright, 2004). Women do not yet serve in educational administration positions in proportion to their representation in the field of education or in proportion to currently trained and certified administrators (Shakeshaft, Brown, Irby, Grogan & Ballenger, 2007).

According to a decennial study by the American Association of School Administrators (AASA), approximately 1.3% of superintendents in the U.S. in 1970 were female and all served in districts with fewer than 10,000 students (Wesson & Marshall, 2012). A 10-year study by the AASA in 2000 showed the number of female superintendents in the U.S. had risen to 13.2% (Glass et al., 2000; Wesson & Marshall, 2012). The AASA's most recent large-scale survey reported that close to one in four superintendents were female (Kowalski et al., 2011). No state or national government agency collects data correlating sex and gender and the superintendency (Sanchez & Thornton, 2010). Despite the apparent gains in female representation in the superintendency, disparity still exists: the general population is half female, half of the student population is female, 72% of the nation's professional educators are female, yet 75.6% of the superintendents are men (Lemasters & Roach, 2012). In Texas, the percentage of female superintendents vacillates below the national percentage—13.5% in 2003, and 16% in 2009 (Sampson & Davenport, 2010).

Most of the research on women in educational leadership focuses on females as mid-managers rather than superintendents; moreover, most of the published research on women in the superintendency has been contributed by a few female scholars who dominate the field of study, and the majority of research on sex, gender and educational leadership remains unpublished and unread in dissertations (Lemasters & Roach, 2012). The number of published studies on women and the superintendency or women and educational leadership since 2000 is far fewer than in the previous decade, indicating a recent decrease in emphasis and interest in research in the field (Lemasters & Roach, 2012). Yet in order to address the recruiting, retention, and mentoring of quality administrators and superintendents in Texas, there is a great need for studies to illuminate the experiential characteristics of educators who successfully achieve top jobs in educational leadership (Wesson & Marshall, 2012).

The perpetuation of male dominance in the profession of educational leadership can be better understood by scrutinizing the underlying masculine normalizations which have traditionally structured discourse, practice, and research on women in educational leadership (Skrla 2003). Leadership theory predicated upon studies of males isn't entirely pertinent for females nor is it helpful for males or females in education leadership settings who are endeavoring to understand the disproportionate number of females in the education profession (Shakeshaft et al., 2007). Lemasters and Roach (2012) explained that, for many decades, leadership theories have been developed by men from the experiences of men, and have been described or taught by men. Women have different experiences of leadership, so it is unreasonable to assume a singular (male) perspective of leadership experience, interpretation, and theory can fully inform the educational leadership profession (Lemasters & Roach, 2012).

Sometimes concepts of gender equity in educational leadership are obscured in the limited research literature available. In a 2006 meta-analysis of six previously conducted naturalistic studies, researchers Rusch and Marshall stated women continue to *dominate* elementary principalships. This is misleading because fewer than 60% of the U.S. elementary principals are women, yet over 70% of all K-12 educators are female (Kowalski et al., 2011). Another example, pointed out by Skrla (2000), was Thomas E. Glass' report to the AASA in 1992 that only 14% of U.S. superintendents believed discrimination adversely affected a significant number of female superintendents, though Glass did not report that his respondents were overwhelmingly (93%) male (Glass, 1992; Skrla, 2000). In a final confusing example from a tri-state study of female superintendents, Sharp et al. (2004) stated, "the truth of the matter is that women head larger districts more than men, 11% to 8%" and, "women lead men in heading small rural districts…28% to 14%" (p. 26). A reader might mistakenly believe more women than men serve in urban and rural superintendencies (Glass, 1992; Glass et al., 2000; Kowalski et al., 2011).

Problem Statement, Purpose, and Significance of Study

Many female educators are reluctant to acknowledge or discuss gender imbalances in relation to their jobs, even when presented with clear evidence of gender discrimination (Moreau, Osgood & Halsall, 2007). There is a need for woman-focused research design and new knowledge about how best to research and educate female educational leaders because there is a shortage of qualified educational leaders, most educators are female, and females express constraint in speaking about matters of inequity (Skrla, 2000). This study did not weigh in on the causes of gender imbalances in educational leadership. The purpose of this inquiry was to reveal aspirations, motivations, needs, and constraints of female South Texas school district superintendents, to better understand how women perceive and experience the social constructions of gender and the superintendency as practicing educational leaders (Skrla, 2000). This study was chosen to illuminate the perceptions of female educational leaders who have ascended to the top school leadership role, because there is a need for gendered perspective on the superintendency, and a need to better understand the superintendency from the perspectives of women (Skrla, 2000, 2003). The theme of how and when female educators experience and evidence aspiration to leadership was an intended purpose of this study. Female educational leaders' perceptions of rural superintendency and Hispanic school leadership, though not intended initial targets, clearly emerged as themes from this flexible, naturalistic study, forming results and recommendations.

Research Questions

The following research questions served to guide this inquiry, which employed feminist research techniques of semi-structured and unstructured interviews, correspondence, and conversation analysis (Bernard, 2006; Robson, 2002).

    1. What are the perceptions of South Texas female superintendents regarding their aspirations, motivations, challenges, and successes in their roles as superintendents?

    2. What were the perceived motivations and supporting factors causing the female participant to *seek and obtain* the superintendent credential?

    3. What does the participant perceive caused her to *aspire* to be a superintendent, and at what point in her career did she experience that aspiration?

    4. What, in the participant's perception, enables her to *sustain* the post of superintendent?

Methods

...there is considerable virtue for real world research in taking on board feminist proposals—particularly in acknowledging the emotional aspects of doing real world research, and the value of emphasizing commitment as against detachment.

                      Robson, 2002, p. 370

This research was of a rich, flexible (qualitative), naturalistic design, based on: case study analyses (with a feminist approach) of the perceived experiences, motivations, and needs of each individual subject; the emergent themes distinguishing and unifying the subjects as a group; and the researcher-as-instrument of data collection (Grogan, 2003; Robson, 2002). Naturalistic study seeks to construct shared meaning and knowledge from divergent realities collected from multiple, personal, contextual, real-world perspectives, of the subjects and the observing researcher (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Robson, 2002). This naturalistic research was progenerative, giving life and shape to its design as data was collected and the study emerged. Naturalistic study was thus specifically appropriate to investigate the questions being posed to a marginalized population (females) and questions not studied adequately in the research heretofore. "The traditional literature on the superintendency might provide only a partial understanding of what it is all about" (Grogan, 2003, p.18).

Researcher as Instrument

The researcher knowingly acted as an adaptable human instrument, critically reflecting as "inquirer and respondent" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 187, 191). The researcher's constructed learning in the naturalistic process of the study, informed subsequent inquiry and allowed the researcher to adapt her efforts. The researcher's feministic approach to the study, ethic of care for the participants and their perspectives, and the need to provide full transferability of the data to readers of the study led the researcher-as-instrument to a methodology of collecting and reporting the data related to *portraiture*, used in a similar study of Latina superintendents (Gonzales, 2007; Grogan, 2003). The portraiture method advocates conveyance of richness and texture of the data, without distortion of the participant's meaning to facilitate a "representation of social reality" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). The *portraits* of the participants, individually and as a set, were presented as narrative case-study descriptions and employed a large amount of the interview response data from each participant to allow a thick, rich, undistorted representation of school superintendency as perceived by the female participants.

Participant Selection

A purposive sample (Erlandson et al., 1993) was initially identified for potential participation in the study and included current and former colleagues of the researcher who were serving in South Texas school districts as superintendents. Snowball sampling was in turn utilized to identify more potential participants (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003). Nineteen area superintendents were invited in person or via email, online social networks, or text; nine expressed interest in the study and seven were able to schedule interviews.

Data Collection and Analysis

The study employed the use of semi-structured open-ended interview questions (interviews were 1-2 hours long) and

informal pre- and post-interview dialogue between the investigator and the research participants for triangulation and member checks (Bernard, 2006; Erlandson et al., 1993). Research data was generated in qualitative and naturalistic form, allowing respondents to engage in conversation about their goals and aspirations prior to obtaining superintendent certification, compared to their present career intentions (Robson, 2002). Confidentiality was guaranteed through anonymous transcription and coding of interviews, the use of pseudonyms, and signed informed consent statements per the researcher's university guidelines for human subject study. Interview data was painstakingly transcribed, verbatim, soon after meeting with each participant. The data was scrutinized: statements were discretized and pre-coded to determine emergent themes relevant to the guiding research questions. The data was compiled using a critical charting method informed by study of Colin Robson's *Real World Research* and his suggestions for development of coding schemes in naturalistic observational methods research (Robson, 2002).

Research Design

Case studies. In this research, a case study refers to the detailed account of one female subject, exploring contextual factors related to the superintendency, perceptions, attitudes, deterrents, motivations, and possible causes, determinants, experiences, and contributors (Robson, 2003). Precisely because case study allows for dense reporting of both methodology and data, Lincoln and Guba (1985) have asserted it is the research design most appropriate for naturalistic study (1985). It is important to note that the purpose of conducting a set of case studies was to provide a wealth of feminine perspective on the superintendency, not to attempt *analytic generalizability* of conclusions, for as Robson (2003) warned, **"**Case studies and their outcomes are likely to be multifaceted and difficult to capture adequately within a simple theory" (p. 183). This study was too small to support generalizable claims but may suggest themes for further research.

Feminist approach. Grogan (2003) stated, "Feminist scholarship advocates action that results in a more equitable distribution of resources and opportunities for those who have been marginalized" and recommended the researcher harbor an "ethic of care" and a constant "focus on equity" (p. 18). These feminist scholarly principles were employed in discourse with the participants and in communication about the research.

Trustworthiness and Credibility

Validity. *Trustworthiness* and *credibility* can be thought of as two types of validity—two ways the research can be accurate, true, or correct. The *trustworthiness* of a research inquiry refers to a combination of truth-value, potential application, neutrality of findings, and external judgments made about the consistency of its procedures (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The *credibility* of a study refers to the measure of agreement on the findings of an inquiry, *by the subjects of the study*, within the context of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Trustworthiness can be thought

of as an external judgment of an inquiry, whereas, credibility is an internal judgment of a study.

Trustworthiness and credibility in naturalistic inquiry, which may enable the researcher to substantiate to observer's claims made by the study, were ensured primarily by triangulation of data, member-checks, and purposive sampling techniques (Erlandson et al., 1993). Triangulation efforts included asking all participants the same set of questions to provide a framework for developing common themes among the responses. The researcher collaborated with the respondents to clarify interview responses and build background knowledge (member checks) via post-interview conversations in person, in telephone conversations, and through emails, and each participant previewed her own case-study portrait as well as portions of the transcribed and themed data from her interview (Erlandson et al., 1993). Efforts to ensure trustworthiness and credibility of the research involved peer debriefing and support from the researcher's colleagues, including negative case-analysis, to ensure personal knowledge, or lack thereof, did not misdirect emerging themes in the data (Erlandson, et al., 1993). The researcher did not cherry-pick data or participants. All respondents who could participate were included in the study.

Transferability. In traditional research design, applicability of the findings is judged based upon the generalizability of the result to another situation, population, or time. In a naturalistic study, *transferability* refers to a desired level of similarity between the sending and the receiving contexts (Erlandson et al., 1993). Exhaustive and careful verbatim transcribing of interviews, followed by member-checks of the summarized participant descriptions by the superintendents in the study, was used to ensure full transferability of the data. The researcher took these measures to ensure the readers of this study will receive exactly what the participants of the study intended to convey.

Findings and Results

The researcher collected perceptive data from the seven practicing superintendents that agreed to participate in the study. The district chiefs ranged in experience from a first year, emergency certified superintendent, to a woman who has served as a superintendent in South Texas school districts for almost 30 years. The women participating had served as superintendents in South Texas for over 75 years combined, with over 30 years experience in rural districts. Five of the 7 participants were leading rural districts (see Table 1, p. 6).

The researcher focused on the respondents' perceptions, to allow participating South Texas female superintendents' voices to inform the field about their aspirations, motivations, challenges, and successes in their roles as superintendents, as they recalled and knew them. The researcher included ethnic descriptors and information about marital and family status only when provided by the participants in response to the guiding questions of the interview, but did not apply a cross-case comparative survey of demographic, cultural, or ethnic descriptors. The terms

'Hispanic', 'Latina', and 'Anglo' were used by the participants to describe themselves.

Table 1

Rural District Experience Among the Superintendent Participants

Participant Name	District Size	Rural?	Years of Rural Superintendent Experience
Gloria	5,400	Yes	9
Sarah	3,800	No	2
Diana	1,900	No	3
Sonia	3,500	Yes	1
Laura	1,000	Yes	4
Erika	320	Yes	4
Christina	315	Yes	9
Totals:	**5 out of 7 led rural school districts**		**32 years rural leadership**

The purpose of this study was to allow women the opportunity to define female superintendency (Grogan, 2003; Skrla, 2003). Specific examples of experiences and perceptions—anecdotes, quotes and narrative summaries—were included in case-study portraits of the participants to provide excellent transferability of the data (Erlandson et al., 1993).

Overview of the Participants

This study included interviews with seven female superintendents serving in South Texas districts ranging in size from approximately 315 to 5,400 students. The participants of the study had between less than one year and close to 30 years individual superintendent experience. A summary review of each of the participant descriptions, derived from interview data revealed by participants, is presented in Table 2, (see p. 7).

Aggregate Findings

Detailed individual responses to guiding questions of the study were used to present aggregate themes as they emerged from transcribed interview data to answer the study's research questions for the participants as a set of case studies. The feministic approach of the methodology of the study (the "ethic of care" employed by the researcher in handling the participants and their data) was a qualitative research effort to ensure transferability of the participants' intended messages to readers of the study (Grogan, 2003, p. 25). It was, therefore, crucial to include the participants' *words* in the report. Findings addressed the guiding questions of this inquiry in the aggregate, and also allowed each participant the opportunity to "define the superintendency" in her voice (Grogan, 2003, p. 17).

Seeking and obtaining the superintendent credential. Gloria began her career with the intention to become a superintendent. Laura made her own decision to pursue the credential during her service as special education director. Five of 7 participants, Sonia, Sarah, Diana, Erika, and Christina, decided to certify for the superintendency only after a mentoring supervisor or professor suggested it to them. Sarah was encouraged to pursue the superintendency by a professor, and did not consider it until he noted her capacity and aptitude.

> I didn't really ever think I would be a superintendent. *That was never the plan*. And it kind of comes back to, *how many women superintendents did I know*?

Aspiring to become a superintendent. Only 4 of 7 study participants admitted they aspired to become superintendents, even though ALL participants clearly prepared for the role. Gloria always intended to become a superintendent. Three other participants developed the aspiration to the superintendency. Laura's aspiration developed during her service as special education director for a large co-op, where she saw ineffective instructional leadership she thought she could remedy. Christina's aspiration developed in response to frustration with an ineffective interim superintendent in her district. Diana's aspiration developed when she experienced the leadership and mentorship of first female superintendent she had ever known.

> Growing up as a kid it was always males, specifically white males. So I never thought that it was even an option for me. So it wasn't until I saw the first female superintendent that I'm like, wow, there ARE some females out there. And you know, she was white, but she was FEMALE, and so *I could identify with her*.

Sarah, Sonia, and Erika, stated they *never wanted to be* superintendents, despite seeking the credential and preparing for the role. Three of 7 participants said they had searched for superintendent jobs, completing application and search processes. Four of 7 participants had only considered jobs they were recruited for or were pushed to apply for by a spouse or mentor.

Aspirations: Professional and personal goals now. All participants planned to finish their current contracts and expressed a desire to finish work they had begun in their districts. Sarah, Erika, and Gloria were already retired from education, and Sarah had told her board to begin looking for her successor. Some common professional goals were expressed: the three retired-rehired superintendents all mentioned consulting as a possibility in the future; three of the participants stated they planned to teach in their content area at the university level; and three of the superintendents expressed a desire to experience the challenge of leadership in a larger district before they retire. Most had difficulty distinguishing between personal and professional needs and goals. Nevertheless, a few common themes emerged in the personal goals stated by the superintendent participants. Three mentioned that building, renovating, or moving back into a *home* was a personal goal at this point in their life. Two mentioned entrepreneurial plans unrelated to education.

Table 2

Summary Overview of the Participants

Name	Participant Summary Description
Sarah	• Didn't know she wanted to be a superintendent until she was asked to do it. • Never applied for any superintendent position. • Over 29 years as superintendent, hired five times in three districts. • Passed multiple bond elections and trained other superintendents. • Wife, mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother. • Had achieved balance in her personal/professional life; said they are the same.
Erika	• Denied ever wanting to be a superintendent. • Had only applied when recruited or strongly urged by her husband. • Was a fourth year superintendent, retired and rehired by a rural district. • Had interim superintendent experience at a large urban district. • Expressed great difficulty balancing her personal/professional life, and stated she couldn't sleep.
Sonia	• Didn't know she wanted to be a superintendent until asked by her district. • Did not apply for the superintendent job until solicited by her local board. • Was serving her first year as superintendent in rural district, emergency certified. • Superintendency role improved her work-life balance. • Relied on great family support. • Wife and mother of a two-year old.
Laura	• Aspiration emerged in response to dissatisfaction with inadequate leadership. • Began applying after being passed over for a less qualified junior male. • Fourth year superintendent of a rural district, facing a bond election. • Expressed desire to lead a larger district, be a professor, and publish curriculum. • Expressed struggles with work-life balance. • Wife, mother of four and grandmother.
Diana	• Did not know she aspired to superintendency until she met a female superintendent. • Did not directly apply for her first superintendent job, which she took at age 32. • Served as a superintendent for over 15 years in three districts. • Worked to maintain family/work balance. • Expressed desire to lead a larger district and participate in state-level policy-making. • Wife and mother of three young boys.
Christina	• Did not know she wanted to be a superintendent until her board asked her to do it. • Nine consecutive years as superintendent of a PK-8 district. • Never applied for a leadership position she wasn't recruited for. • Worked to maintain family/work balance. • Expressed desire to lead a district that has a high school, or build a high school. • Wife and mother of three young boys.
Gloria	• Aspired to be a superintendent from a young age (high school). • Had nine years of combined superintendent experience in two districts. • Was retired from public school service and rehired serving in a large rural district. • Described herself as a workaholic. • Expressed struggles with personal politics in superintendency. • Wife, single mother of four for 15 years, and grandmother of sixteen.

Motivations. The set of superintendents in this study shared the common motivations summarized in Table 3 (p. 8), presented in descending order of frequency of response. These factors contributed to decisions to certify for the superintendent credential, initial aspirations to become superintendents, and the ability to sustain the post of superintendent.

Successes and sustaining the post of superintendent. The three retired-rehired study participants all made references to the strength they had drawn from their retirement accomplishment. They were not completely dependent on their income from the hiring district, and the district had known this when they were interviewed and during their tenure. They felt free and

compelled to act in the best interest of kids and the district and were not beholden to special interests or the school board's whims. Gloria explained her position to the board that hired her:

> You have a lot of hard decisions to make, and we are all going to take a beating. If you don't want that to happen, don't hire me, because that's what I need to do!

These superintendents felt comfortable that they could walk away with their heads held high in clear conscience if their school boards decided they no longer supported their work.

Table 3

Motivations of Female Superintendents in the Study

Female Superintendents are Motivated By:	Out of 7
Personal drive for excellence	7
Desire to make a difference	7
Acknowledgements of achievement/progress	7
Obligation to positively represent Latina leaders	3 out of 4
Desire to lead	6
Perceived obligation to serve	5
Passion for education/Love for kids	5
Leadership suggestions by others	5
Opportunities that arise	4
Examples of female leaders	4
Desire for challenge	4
"I can DO this", or "I can do this better"	4

Every participant in the study was a wife and a mother, three were grandmothers, and one was a great-grandmother. Five mentioned they are proud of their own children. Four reported pride or satisfaction in seeing children (in their districts or anywhere) succeed as a result of opportunities they had been instrumental in providing. Some described specific programs or improvements and detailed the hard work of participating staff and communities as a contributing factor in student success. Three stated that their life choices in general, or the professional path they had chosen, was a source of pride and/or satisfaction.

The seven participants in this study were all married and had been married the entire time they had served as superintendents. Five cited their husbands as significant sustaining influences, and three said their husbands were the greatest sustaining factor in their ability to do their job. Four described their teams—specifically their central office administrators and campus principals—as powerfully sustaining. Three of the seven cited their own internal drive or personal passion as one of the biggest forces enabling them to sustain the difficult job of superintendent. A couple of the participants stated they had to fight their personal drive in order to maintain balance in their lives, and two stated that their deep faith sustains them in the role of superintendent.

Challenges: Rural superintendency and Work-Fit Balancing Act. Five of 7 participants were leading rural school districts and described challenges related to operating the school organization without personnel dedicated to help expertly manage distinct system components. Sarah and Diana were not leading rural districts, but had in the past.

Gloria, who led the largest district in this study, stated her 5-year experience in a smaller rural district had actually prepared her to lead a much larger district. Sarah and Diana expressed similar perceptions regarding the challenges of previous rural superintendency posts and the preparation they gained there for larger school district leadership. Erika described challenges faced by rural superintendents:

> When you are a rural superintendent, you're everything. You are the chief financial officer, you are curriculum and instruction, you are human resources, you are special education, you are the bus driver. And when you go into a 5A or a 6A district, you surround yourself with the best people you can. You can depend on them. But here? You run up your legal bills. Because you don't know everything. When you are a rural district, there are very unique issues.

The most common challenge for the superintendent participants was balancing their lives. Even though they all stated they had excellent support from their husbands and families, most mentioned an effort to balance the job and family. Christina described:

> I find myself feeling torn between needing to do the job, and being mom. So I struggle with that occasionally. Working to have that balance is very important.

Sarah stated that balance is very important, and she purposefully maintains it even though it's a challenge. Sonia asserted that the superintendency has strengthened her family and support system. Laura explained how hard it is to maintain balance:

> Of course you know I'm a workhorse. I enjoy the work. But I do let it kind of take over, if I don't kind of put the reins on. I'm not real good at that at all.

Erika described work-fit challenges related to pursuing the superintendent credential, earning degrees, and sustaining the post of superintendent:

> The superintendency, the Ph.D., the whole thing was…your life, there's no balance in your life. You get so driven that you forget the rest of you.

Summary and Discussion of Findings

If we accept gender as a useful category of analysis to help us understand the superintendency...we need to draw on the experiences of women in the position. We need to take particular notice of how women define the superintendency.

Grogan, 2003, p. 17

There is a need for a gendered perspective on the superintendency, and a need to understand the superintendency

from the perspectives of women who are successfully accomplishing it (Skrla, 2003). According to Grogan (2003), "Candidate pools for the superintendency are not perceived to be as deep as they once were" (p. 27). The reported perspectives of female superintendents in this study will inform aspiring female leaders, educational leadership programs, and researchers in the field of educational leadership and gender. By examining the perceptions and experiences of women serving as superintendents perhaps, as Grogan (2003) states, "…a reconception of the superintendency might rekindle educators' interest and enthusiasm for this pivotal position" (p. 27.)

A famous and often-quoted large-scale study and decennial report by Thomas E. Glass to the AASA posited seven reasons why American women weren't ascending to the superintendency in proportion to their male counterparts in the field of education (Glass, 2000). His report attempted to explain the underrepresentation of women in the American superintendency with a list of seven 'reasons' for the motivations and aspirations of female professional educators.

Aspirations: Preparing for and Becoming a Superintendent

Glass stated that many women take breaks from their careers to bear and raise children; by the time they have the credentials and experience to transition into mid-management or central office positions, they are often nearing retirement and may be reluctant to embark on a new and uncertain career path towards the superintendency (2000). The participants of this study had all raised children at different stages of their careers. Some had waited to prepare for superintendency until their children were older, and some had nurtured children and careers concurrently. Retirement or near-retirement had not dissuaded these women in their leadership aspirations. The three retired-rehired participants cited their retirement status as a power source in school board relations.

A nationwide study of female superintendents in 2005 showed women entering the superintendency at earlier ages than previously reported; most of the women in the study had secured a superintendent position by 50 years of age, and 36% had become superintendents by age 45 (Shakeshaft et al., 2007). The findings of this study did concur loosely with these results, with 3 of 7 participants ascending to the superintendency before age 47. The women in this study had many years of experience in education prior to accepting superintendent positions, as research shows for women in general (Shakeshaft et al., 2007).

Glass' seven reasons pertaining to aspiration (for why women weren't superintendents) included that he didn't think women were personally interested in the superintendency and women weren't obtaining the superintendent credential (Glass, 2000). The findings of this study showed the participants clearly indicated their interest in the role of superintendent through their active preparation for the role. *Preparation was evidence of aspiration,* according to the findings of this study. These women had made personal and professional choices and sacrifices to prepare to be superintendents. Glass was incorrect.

Women ARE personally interested in the role of superintendent—interested enough to prepare for it.

What Motivates Female Educational Leaders?

The research literature does support Glass' assertion that women enter the field of education and want to lead in education for different reasons than men (Glass, 2000). Female administrators serving in poverty-stricken communities are motivated more by intrinsic rewards and personal relationships than salary, holidays, or title, and instructional leadership matters more to women than salary (Krüger, 2008; Lawson, 2008). However research literature on perceptions and motivations of female educational leaders is sparse, and most has focused on barriers, career path, and the attainment of leadership roles (Lemasters & Roach, 2012).

This study provided insight into the motivations of female educational leaders by revealing the perceived motivations of the set of seven participating superintendents. The aggregate findings of this study indicated these female superintendents are motivated by: a deep personal drive for excellence; a desire to make a difference for students, teachers and community; acknowledgements of district achievements or progress; an obligation to positively represent female and/or Latina leaders; an obligation to serve others; a passion for education, love for kids, and desire for their success; leadership suggestions by others; opportunities; examples of other female leaders; desire for challenges; and a feeling that "I can DO this," or "I can do this better."

Challenges Faced by Female Superintendents

A profound unifying emergent theme among the seven cases was rural school leadership. Lemasters and Roach stated that 60% of female superintendents lead rural school districts of under 3,000 students, with small support staffs (2012). A survey of all female Texas superintendents revealed that 68.8% served in rural districts with fewer than 1,500 students (Sampson & Davenport, 2010). Rural school leadership is a gendered issue because women serve in rural districts in higher proportions relative to their representation in the superintendency. One tri-state study reported 28% of female superintendents served in rural districts whereas 14% of male superintendents served in rural districts (Sharp et al., 2004).

Five of 7 participants were serving as superintendents in rural Texas school districts, and two were leading suburban districts. This study used a definition of rural school district, provided by the Texas Administrative Code (TAC), as a Texas public school district having a majority of its schools located in a county with population fewer than 50,000 (Texas Legislative Council, 2014). This study contributed the important perspectives of seven female superintendents who have over 30 years of combined rural school district leadership experience (see Table 1, p. 6).

Implications for Future Research

According to Shakeshaft et al. (2007), women accounted for less than 10% of the scholarly inquiries in educational administration

between 1995 and 2005. Thus, females in educational leadership are still underrepresented in research, underscoring the continued and unabated need for woman-focused research designs and knowledge about how to best research female educational leaders' experiences (Skrla, 2000).

An important emergent contextualizing characteristic in this study was Hispanic female school leadership. This study contributed the perspectives of four successful female superintendents serving South Texas school districts who identified themselves as Hispanic, three of whom were leading rural Texas school districts. Most female educational administrators in South Texas are Hispanic and they preside over Hispanic serving schools and systems (Quilantàn & Manchaca-Ochoa, 2004; Trevino Jr., Braley, Brown, & Slate, 2008). There is sparse research literature to inform the field of educational leadership on Hispanic female superintendents (Quilantàn & Menchaca-Ochoa, 2004). There is little research base in the area of minority female contributions to educational leadership, and the few studies on minority female educational leaders focus on African American women (Santiago, 2008).

Recommendations for Preparation Programs

The educational systems and organizations in Texas and the nation must foster further study and improve data collection and dissemination on sex and gender issues in the field of educational leadership and in education administration preparation programs, which must address women's experiences, reflections upon and responses to those experiences, career aspirations, and need for mentorship (Sanchez & Thornton, 2010). Educational leadership preparation programs in South Texas must give greater attention to the placement of talented female educational leaders within its districts (Young & McLeod, 2001).

Leading educational leadership and gender researchers have asserted that female educational administration candidates have specific needs and challenges, which must be addressed programmatically (Shakeshaft et al., 2007). Stephens (2009) stated that without greater knowledge of the behaviors and characteristics of successful female school district superintendents, leadership preparation programs cannot make the adjustments necessary to provide focused instruction to assist new female superintendents. Traditional leadership theory, which has excluded women's experiences and voices, has resulted in sexist curricular material in educational leadership preparation programs (Shakeshaft et al., 2007). The predicted impending retirement of currently serving educational leaders and the critical shortage of educators to fill those posts requires preparation programs to provide *gendered* solutions by addressing needs and concerns raised by the women inhabiting the role of superintendent in the region (Young, 2003).

All of the participants in this study were either leading or have led *rural districts* in South Texas. Each participant mentioned *rural superintendency* as a concern. Females are twice as likely to serve as superintendents in rural districts as males (Kowalski et al., 2011). Most female superintendents (60%) serve in rural districts (Lemasters & Roach, 2012). Thus, leadership preparation programs must address rural school district leadership concerns because females, who make up the majority of educational leadership program participants, are more likely than males to serve in rural districts during their careers. Erika said this about her superintendent preparation program:

> In my particular role as a rural superintendent, it did not prepare me. And I went to...I would love to say...if not THE top, the second top, university in the state of Texas. Rural superintendency should be a *prerequisite* for any superintendent.

Conclusion

Five out of 7 women in this study did not acknowledge their aspiration to certify for superintendency, and 3 out of 7 did not acknowledge their aspiration to be a superintendent, even though all had obtained the credential, and all were superintendents. Given that school districts need the most talented, technically prepared professionals to serve as superintendents, the profession must acknowledge the manner in which females—dominating education at a participation rate of 72% and earning advanced degrees proportionally to their numbers in the field—express aspiration to leadership. *Women express aspiration through preparation*, which often follows from the suggestion and mentoring of a colleague, supervisor, or professor.

Consider a hypothetical example of 20 superintendent jobs chosen from 100 educators. Women earn advanced degrees and participate in educational leadership preparation programs in proportion to their dominating numbers in the education profession, and they have more years of experience in the classroom. Figure 1 below illustrates: 72% of educators are female, and 28% are male; 24.4% of superintendents are female. Thus, the ratio of female superintendents to male superintendents is approximately 1:3. In this example of 20 superintendents, 5 will be female and 15 will be male. Female talent and preparation is being wasted (Adams & Hambright, 2004).
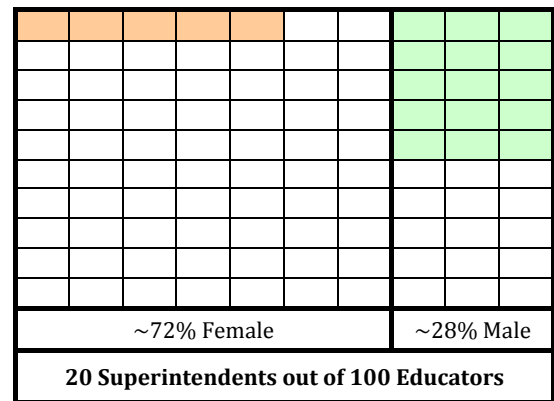

Figure 1. *Is the Profession Hiring the Best-Prepared Educators for the Job of Superintendent?*

South Texas leadership preparation program instructors and successful administrators serving in districts will need to actively mentor or sponsor newly certified (especially Hispanic) entry-level female administrators in South Texas school districts in order to retain them and their expertise and talent (Adams & Hambright, 2004). This has begun in South Texas, which has many rural districts, where 30% of superintendents are female. Perhaps a burgeoning culture of successful female leadership (superintendents and principals) in South Texas has afforded local school boards a willingness to recruit, groom and hire women for leadership. School boards and the search firms they hire are gatekeepers to the superintendency (Shakeshaft et al., 2007). Therefore leadership preparation programs and school boards need to be educated on research that indicates hiring female superintendents will increase program quality (Krüger, 2008; Roser et al., 2009).

Precisely because women so heavily dominate the field of education, they must contribute their voices and perspectives to bring about better clarity and depth of understanding of the practice of leadership in the education, which will serve to open greater opportunities for women in leadership (Lemasters & Roach, 2012). The participants of this study, seven female South Texas rural superintendents, contributed their voices to this end.

References

Adams, K. L., & Hambright, W. G. (2004). Encouraged or discouraged: Women teacher leaders becoming principals. *Clearing House, 77*(5), 209-212. doi:10.3200/TCHS.77.5.209-212

Bernard, H. R. (2005). *Research methods in anthropology: Qualitative and quantitative approaches*. Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press.

Blount, J. M. (1999). Manliness and the gendered construction of school administration in the USA. *International Journal of Leadership in Education, 2*(2), 55-68. doi:10.1080/136031299293101

Erlandson, D. A., Harris, E. L., Skipper, B. L., & Allen, S. D. (1993). *Doing naturalistic inquiry: A guide to methods*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

Gall, M. D., Gall, J. P., & Borg, W. R. (2003). *Educational research: An introduction* (7th ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson Education.

Glass, T. E., Bjork, L., & Brunner, C. C. (2000). *The study of the American school superintendency, 2000: A look at the superintendent of education in the new millennium*. Arlington, VA: American Association of School Administrators.

Glass, T. E. (1992). *The 1992 study of the American school superintendency: America's education leaders in a time of reform*. Arlington, VA: American Association of School Administrators.

Glass, T. E. (2000). Where are all the women superintendents? *The School Administrator, 57*(6), 28-32. Retrieved from http://www.aasa.org/SchoolAdministratorArticle.aspx?id=14492

Gonzales, I. (2007). *Latinas aspiring to the superintendency: A portraiture study* (Doctoral dissertation, Washington State University, Pullman, Washington). Retrieved from http://www.dissertations.wsu.edu/Dissertations/Spring2007/I_Gonzales_043007.pdf

Grogan, M. (2003). Laying the groundwork for a reconception of the superintendency from feminist postmodern perspectives. In M. Young & L. Sklra (Eds.), *Reconsidering feminist research in educational leadership* (pp. 9-34). New York, NY: State University of New York.

Kowalski, T. J., McCord, R. S., Petersen, G. J., Young, I. P., & Ellerson, N. M. (2011). *The American school superintendent: 2010 Decennial study*. Blue Ridge Summit, PA: Rowman & Littlefield Education.

Krüger, M. L. (2008). School leadership, sex and gender: Welcome to difference. *International Journal of Leadership in Education, 11*(2), 155-168. doi:10.1080/13603120701576266

Lawrence-Lightfoot, S., & Davis, J. H. (1997). *The art and science of portraiture* (1st ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Lawson, J. E. (2008). Women leaders in high-poverty community schools: Work-related stress and family impact. *Canadian Journal of Education, 31*(1), 55-77. Retrieved from http://www.csse-scee.ca/CJE/Articles/FullText/CJE31-1/CJE31-1-lawson.pdf

Lemasters, L., & Roach, V. (2012, Spring). 3-Dimensional portrait of the female CEO. *International Journal of Educational Leadership Preparation, 7*(1), 1-12. Retrieved from http://www.eric.ed.gov/PDFS/EJ971686.pdf

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.

Moreau, M. P., Osgood, J., & Halsall, A. (2007). Making sense of the glass ceiling in schools: An exploration of women teachers' discourses. *Gender and Education, 19*(2), 237-253. doi:10.1080/09540250601166092

Petrie, G., & Lindauer, P. (2001). Princessipal: The travails of a female administrator breaking through in the rural south--a case study. *Research for Educational Reform, 6*(1), 51-63. Retrieved from http://connection.ebscohost.com/c/articles/6350802/princessipal-travails-female-administrator-breaking-through-rural-south-case-study

Quilantàn, C. M., & Menchaca-Ochoa, V. (2004). The superintendency becomes a reality for Hispanic women. *Kappa Delta Pi Record, 40*(3), 124-127. doi:10.1080/00228958.2004.10516421

Robson, C. (2002). *Real world research* (2nd ed.). Oxford, England: Blackwell Publishing, Ltd.

Roser, V., Brown, M. S., & Kelsey, C. L. (2009). Principal gender as related to campus size, level, and academic rating. *Advancing Women in Leadership Journal, 29*(10), 1-14. Retrieved from http://www.advancingwomen.com/awl/Vol29_2009/Valer_Rosser.pdf

Sampson, P. M., & Davenport, M. (2010). The current women superintendents in Texas: Still in the minority. *Journal of Women in Educational Leadership, 8*(3), 143-158. Retrieved from http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1011&context=jwel

Sanchez, J. E., & Thornton, B. (2010). Gender issues in K-12 educational leadership. *Advancing Women in Leadership Journal, 30*(13), 1-15. Retrieved from http://www.advancingwomen.com/awl/Vol30_2010/Sanchez_Jafeth_AWL_Vol_30_No._13_final_9_21_10.pdf

Santiago, M. (2008). *A case study in public K-12 education: Hispanic female (Latinas) school administrators' perceptions of their role and experiences as principals within Central Florida* (Doctoral dissertation,). Retrieved from scholarcommons.usf.edu

Shakeshaft, C., Brown, G., Irby, B., Grogan, M., & Ballenger, J. (2007). Increasing gender equity in educational leadership. In S. Klein, B. Richardson, D. Grayson, L. Fox, C. Kramarae, D. Pollard & C. Dwyer (Eds.), *Handbook for achieving gender equity through education* (2nd ed., pp. 103-129). New York, NY: Taylor & Francis Group.

Sharp, W. L., Malone, B. G., Walter, J. K., & Supley, M. L. (2004). A three-state study of female superintendents. *Educational Research Quarterly, 27*(3), 22-37. Retrieved from http://www.eric.ed.gov/PDFS/EJ792860.pdf

Sklra, L. (2000). The social construction of gender in the superintendency. *Journal of Education Policy, 15*(3), 293-316. doi:10.1080/02680930050030446

Sklra, L. (2003). Normalized femininity. In M. Young & L. Sklra (Eds.), *Reconsidering feminist research in educational leadership* (pp. 247-263). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Stephens, L. (2009). Barbed wire, bumpy roads, and begonias. *Journal of Philosophy & History of Education, 59*, 50-66. Retrieved from http://www.journalofphilosophyandhistoryofeducation.com/jophe59.pdf

Texas Education Agency [TEA] (2012). *Certified superintendent demographics by preparation route 2007-2011*. Retrieved from http://www.tea.state.tx.us/WorkArea/linkit.aspx?LinkIdentifier=id&ItemID=2147509963&libID=2147509950

Texas Legislative Council (2014, September). *Definitions of "Rural" in Texas statutes and the Texas administrative code as of July 2014*. Retrieved from Research Division website: http://www.tlc.state.tx.us/pubspol/Def_Rural_Statutes.pdf

Trevino Jr., D., Braley, R. T., Brown, M. S., & Slate, J. R. (2008). Challenges of the public school superintendency: Differences by tenure and district location. *Florida Journal of Educational Administration & Policy, 1*(2), 98-109. Retrieved from http://education.ufl.edu/fjeap/files/2011/01/FJEAP_Spring-2008_Slate_et_al.pdf

Wesson, S., & Marshall, R. L. (2012). Career pathways, experiences, and challenges of Texas public school superintendents. *National Forum of Educational Administration and Supervision Journal, 30*(1), 88-100. Retrieved from http://www.scribd.com/doc/110716746

Young, M. D., & McLeod, S. (2001). Flukes, opportunities, and planned interventions: Factors affecting women's decisions to become school administrators. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 37*(4), 462-502. doi:10.1177/0013161X01374003

Young, M. (2003). Troubling policy discourse: Gender, constructions, and the leadership crisis. In M. Young & L. Sklra (Eds.), *Reconsidering feminist research in educational leadership* (pp. 265-298). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.